

Inferring social meaning from language variation: Liminality and gender

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BACKGROUND

Gender and LVC

- gender implicated in LVC models and theories of language change (e.g. Labov's gender paradox)
- gender an important social dimension of identity

Social meaning and LVC

- stereotypes are easy to identify, but under-the-radar social meaning is harder to assess
- models show correlations but not social interpretability
 - young women leading change doesn't mean innovation signals [+feminine] in speech community
- do we expect all variation to pattern in the same way regardless of social meaning?
 - structural vs. social motivations

Needed: filter for social meaning

- perception studies – need to already know what you're testing
- production data – need a *principled* way to decide what might be carrying social meaning

Liminality

- liminal people have crossed a socially-recognised category boundary
 - gender, class, region, etc.
- perceived as (or aiming to be perceived as) authentic once across boundary (different from Rampton's *crossing*)
 - Study 1: young trans men liminal wrt gender
 - Study 2: actor as [professionally] liminal wrt UK regional accent

RQs

- Does liminality framework help in identifying socially meaningful variation related to gender and language change?
- Does liminality also work with other dimensions of identity, or is gender 'special'?
- Does it work in more stable language systems?

STUDY 1: GENDER IN NZE

NZE vowels known to be undergoing change (e.g. Gordon et al. 2004), so age + gender likely relevant.

	queer women	straight women	queer men	straight men	trans men	total	
older	4	5	5	4		18	conversational interview data collected in 2013-2015 (Hazenberg 2017)
younger	4	5	5	4	5	23	
total	8	10	10	8	5	41	

GOAT onset (F1)

Gender	Coef	N	Mean (Hz)
ysw	-26.6	301	617
ysm	-23.2	228	631
yqm	-22.4	279	625
yqw	-19.7	190	626
ym	-15.4	308	636
oqm	-0.6	194	662
osw	19.0	244	668
oqw	37.0	171	681
osm	46.0	285	697

Range 72.559 p<0.001

Also retained as significant in model:

Preceding segment (p<0.001)

Following segment (p<0.001)

speaker included as random effect

FACE onset (ED)

Gender	Coef	N	Mean (Hz)
ysw	-65.4	463	511
ym	-45.3	357	520
yqm	-42.4	239	532
ysm	-41.3	342	540
yqw	-19.4	359	553
oqw	27.5	232	612
osw	59.6	350	634
oqm	73.7	285	650
osm	111.3	427	706

Range 176.705 p=0.001

Also retained as significant in model:

Preceding segment (p<0.001)

Following segment (p<0.001)

speaker included as random effect

STRUT (F1)

Gender	Coef	N	Mean (Hz)
yqm	-29.9	391	716
ym	-24.0	432	722
ysm	-7.1	314	740
ysw	-7.1	404	737
yqw	-0.4	293	748
oqw	2.4	270	751
oqm	7.5	336	750
osw	26.1	342	768
osm	32.9	335	779

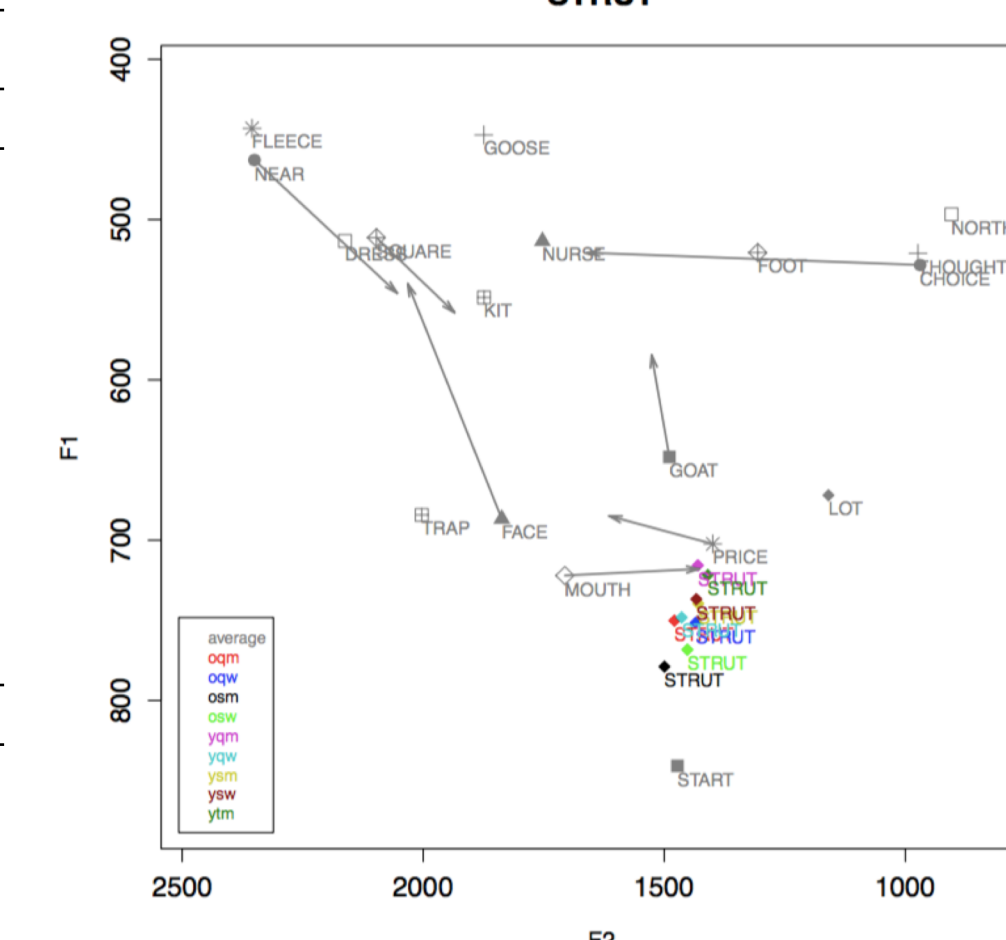
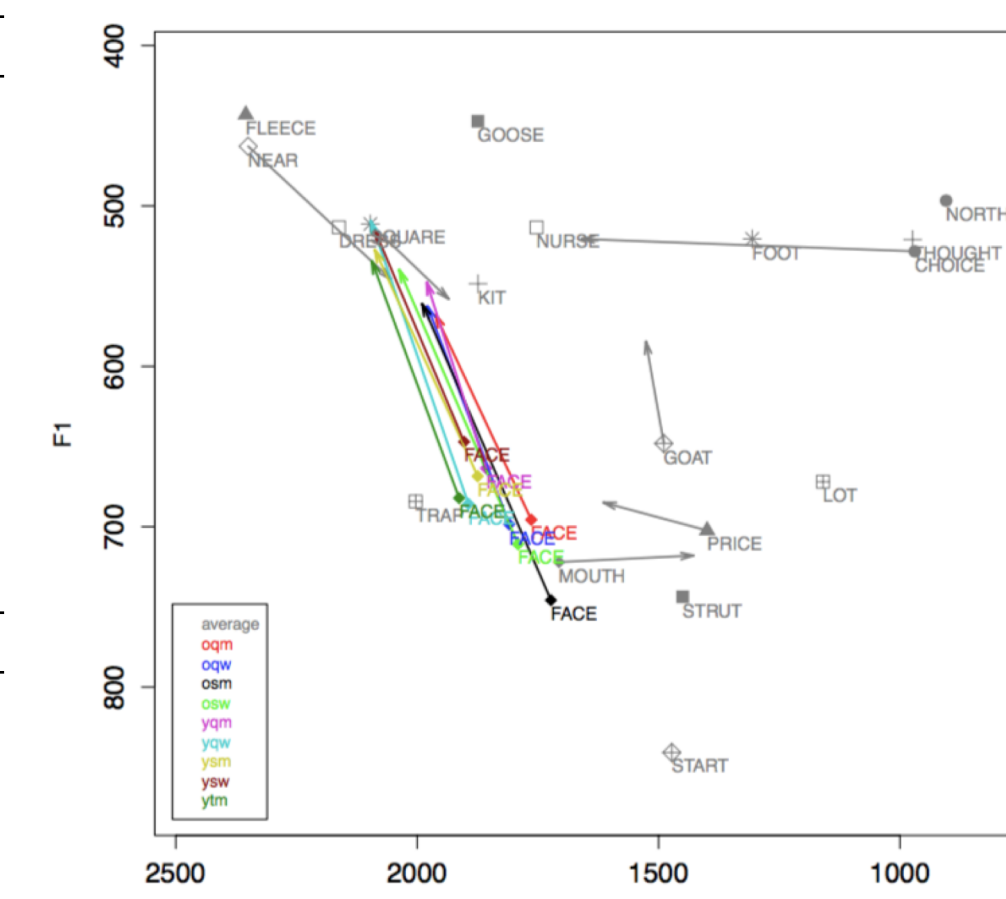
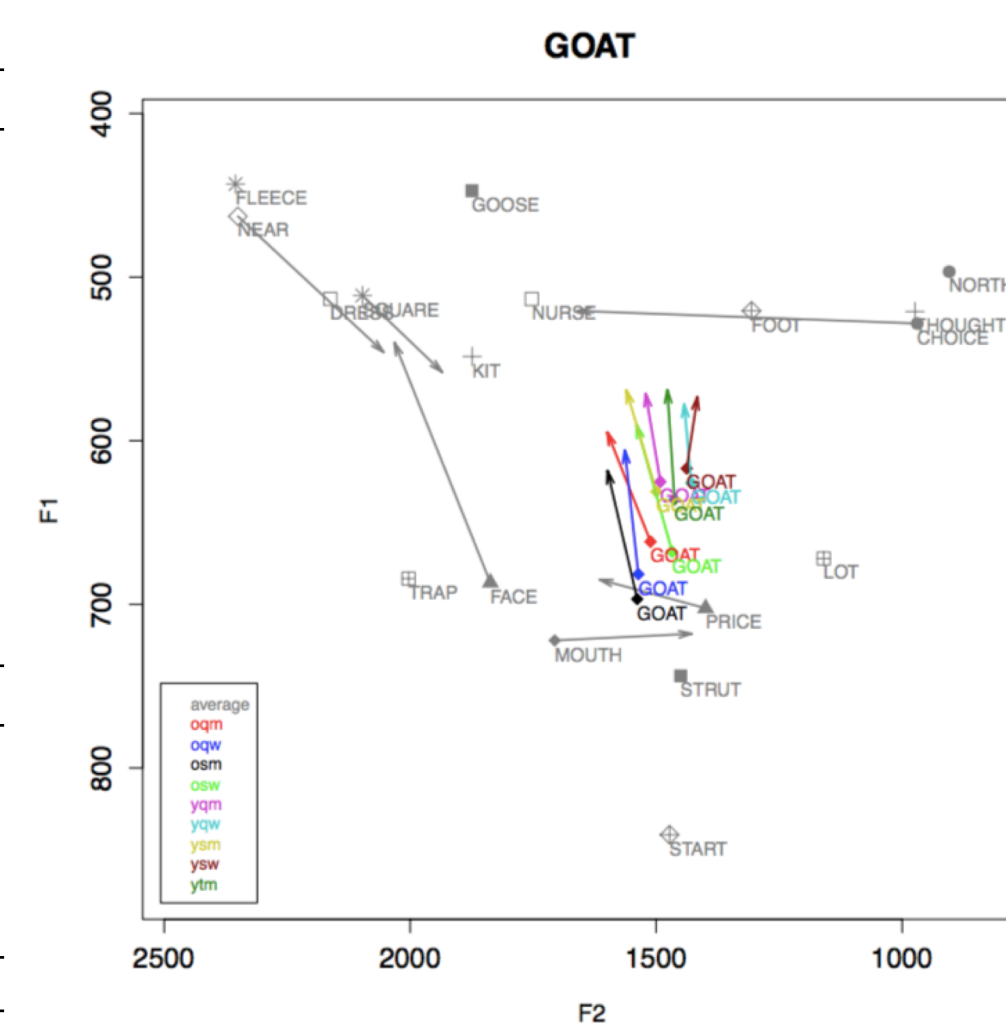
Range 62.777 p<0.001

Also retained as significant in model:

Preceding segment (p<0.001)

Following segment (p<0.001)

speaker included as random effect



Young trans men consistently pattern with their age group, but they are *selective* in which vowels they pattern with young men and which with young women (the gender they were socialised into in childhood).

- gender-liminal people provide evidence for which variables carry socially-interpretable gendered meaning

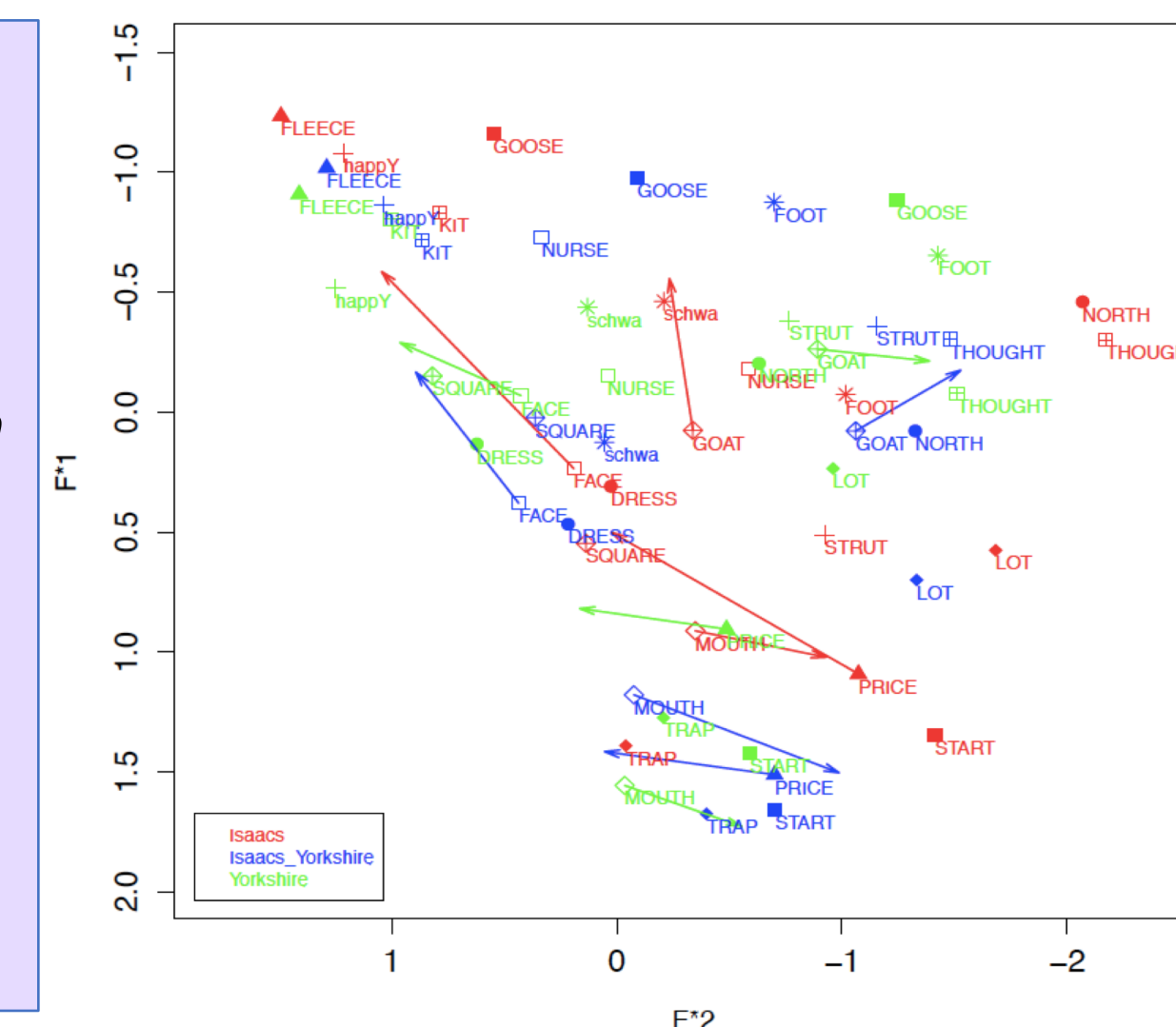
STUDY 2: REGIONAL VARIATION IN UK

Jason Isaacs

- interviewed on BBC by high school acquaintance (2016)
- lauded performance of 'broad Yorkshire accent' in *Death of Stalin* (2017)

Brian Palmer

- from Sheffield, Yorkshire
- character in *Kes* (1969) cited by Isaacs as model for character in *Death of Stalin*



What Isaacs gets "right"

- FOOT/STRUT, TRAP/START, GOAT: stereotypes of Yorkshire English
 - Isaacs adapts accent in performance
- GOOSE: not a stereotype of YE
 - Isaacs backs towards YE

What Isaacs gets "wrong"

- LOT, DRESS: not stereotypes of YE
 - Isaacs maintains his own relative positions in vowel space
- schwa: not a stereotype of YE
 - Isaacs unexpectedly lowers

Isaacs is *selective* in which vowels he adapts in performing a Yorkshire accent, suggesting he can filter by social meaning without compromising the 'authenticity' of the accent.

Next steps

- Triangulation:** Elicitation tasks and perception experiments to confirm what production data suggests.
- Broaden the scope:** Explore productivity of liminality in other strata of variation, other languages and varieties, other social identities, etc.
- Modelling:** Are [+social] variables the same as [-social] ones, or are there differences that can help address how synchronic variation tips over into diachronic change?

Gordon, Elizabeth, Lyle Campbell, Jennifer Hay, Margaret MacLagan, Andrea Sudbury & Peter Trudgill. 2004. *New Zealand English: Its origins and evolution*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Hazenberg, Evan. 2017. *Liminality as a lens on social meaning: A cross-variable study of gender in New Zealand English*. PhD thesis. Wellington, NZ: Victoria University of Wellington.

Labov, William. 1972. *Sociolinguistic patterns*. Philadelphia, US: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Rampton, Ben. 1995. *Crossing: Language and ethnicity among adolescents*. Essex, UK: Longman.